

Agamemnon's Spectacular Death in Seneca's *Agamemnon*

This paper examines Seneca's depiction of Agamemnon's death in the *Agamemnon* as a spectacle worthy of the amphitheaters of imperial Rome. I argue that Seneca evokes the world of amphitheatrical entertainment in order to frame Clytemnestra's murder of her husband as a public execution to be enjoyed by a large audience of onlookers keen on revenge.

That Seneca infuses his tragedies with elements drawn from the arena is a well-known aspect of his tragic corpus (see Shelton 2000). Regarding the *Agamemnon* itself, it has long been noted that Seneca evokes gladiatorial combat at the climactic moment when Clytemnestra kills her husband. Cassandra, who describes the scene, uses the term *habet* ("he's got it", 901) to relate that Agamemnon has been mortally wounded by his ax-wielding wife. As Tarrant remarks, "*habet*... is gladiatorial language" (Tarrant 1976, 343). Moreover, Littlewood has demonstrated that Seneca depicts Cassandra as a sadistic spectator, one "for whose entertainment [the killing of Agamemnon] is enacted" (Littlewood 2004, 220). But I think there is still more to be said about the spectacular nature of Agamemnon's death.

Although Littlewood's analysis of Cassandra's spectatorship is excellent, it should be noted that Seneca creates a large internal audience for the killing. In addition to Cassandra, there is the Chorus of Trojan Women who, like Cassandra, are now prisoners of war in Argos. Even more significantly, Cassandra summons the souls of all the Trojans who died in the Trojan War and invites them to peek out from the Underworld to watch Agamemnon's demise (*uos, umbrae, precor, / iurata superis unda, te pariter precor: / reserate paulum terga nigrantis poli, / leuis ut Mycenas turba prospiciat Phrygum. / spectate, miseri: fata se uertunt retro*, 754-8). As this passage indicates, Cassandra wants as many Trojans as possible to enjoy seeing Clytemnestra

exact vengeance upon Agamemnon—victor over Troy (778-9)—and to experience this vengeance vicariously through his vengeful wife’s actions. Thus a corporate Trojan, retributive gaze is fixed on the spectacle of Agamemnon’s death.

The theme of retribution is, of course, one of the hallmarks of the *Agamemnon* (see Shelton 1983). But what has gone unnoticed is the fact that the revenge-theme intersects with the amphitheatrical aspects of Agamemnon’s death I have been discussing. This is so because I suggest that Seneca depicts Clytemnestra’s murder of her husband as a public execution. In her discussion of public executions in Rome, Coleman notes that “a retributive basis is very prominent in Roman penal practice” (Coleman 1990, 45). Moreover, I suggest that Seneca frames the killing of Agamemnon as a reenactment of the murder of Priam, thus qualifying it as an example of what Coleman has dubbed a “fatal charade”, i.e. the use of mythological reenactments to make public executions in the arena more interesting and entertaining for the audience (Coleman 1990). One of the most remarkable aspects of Seneca’s presentation of Agamemnon’s death is that it is a reprise of Priam’s death: Argos becomes Troy, as it were, with Agamemnon playing the unenviable role of Priam (*spectemus! epulae regia instructae domo, / quales fuerunt ultimae Phrygibus dapes, / celebrantur; ostro lectus Iliaco nitet / merumque in auro ueteris Assaraci trahunt. / et ipse picta ueste sublimis iacet, / Priami superbas corpore exuuias gerens*, 875-80; Lohikoski 1966 is very useful on this theme). Thus Seneca has greatly embellished the moment in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* when Clytemnestra prompts her husband to trample on the purple embroideries by asking, “And what do you think Priam would have done, if he had achieved what you have?” (935).

In Seneca, the decapitation of Agamemnon (901-3)—a common form of public execution in Rome—is not just a theatrical event, but an amphitheatrical one, a ‘fatal charade’ in which

entertainment and the desire for retribution intersect, as the spectacles staged in the arena find their way onto Seneca's tragic stage.

Bibliography

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